By drawing upon Barthes' discussion on mythologies, analyse an example from 'mainstream' animation or games to discuss whether it proliferates or subverts mythologies about identity and how it does this.

In this essay, I will explore whether or not my chosen animated film proliferates or subverts the mythologies attached to the identity represented. The identity which I will explore in this essay is the 'ethnic group' and how they are represented in the Walt Disney animated feature film *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* (*Atlantis*) (2002). I will present an in-depth discussion of the mythologies embedded within this 'mainstream' animation by drawing upon the writings of Roland Barthes (1972). To do so, one must first clarify what is meant by a mythology, and how it may be identified. Furthermore, identity itself must be explained, in order to truly understand the concepts of the 'Atlantean' ethnic group.

In order to evaluate how *Atlantis* proliferates or subverts mythologies about an identity, we must first discuss Barthes' theories on myth. Barthes pioneered the concept of mythologies within the context of everyday social culture in his book, appropriately named, 'Mythologies' (Barthes 1972). His theories state that a single form can have a multitude of different meanings, and that these meanings are learned. I say 'learned' as opposed to a form that simply stands; it is not 'natural'. It is explained that myth is a form that has historically become to provide a connotation which may be entirely and logically separate from its literal self through the means of discourse. Within 'Mythologies' (1972), Barthes states that myth is, and lends itself, to language; as it will forever remain a malleable form for interpretation. Barthes defines these concepts by means of Saussure's linguistic model of semiotics: the signifier, the signified and the sign. However, Barthes describes myth as a 'second-order semiological system', involving an additional layer of depth whereby the mythological signifier is made up of all three components of the original Saussure model. This idea works in a linear path, whereby one cannot return back to the origins of the form; "myth is speech stolen and restored" (Barthes 1972, p.124). This is to say that once a myth is attached to a form, it cannot be disconnected and we cannot interpret it in its natural state. For instance, it is a common concept that an object removed and replaced with an exact replica does not deny it from being a replica, it is not the original.

> "Myth is a semiological system which has the pretension of transcending itself into a factual system." (Barthes 1972, p.133)

Therefore, myth is simply accepted as truth by the general audience; discourse cementing itself within their beliefs, unquestioned.

Throughout this essay, I will discuss the mythologies within a specific identity in a mainstream work of animation. However, identity itself has a deeper foundation, as is explained in the writings of Stuart Hall. In order to analyse an identity, one must fully comprehend what the concept of identity entails.

> "Identification is constructed on the back of a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group" (Hall 1996, p.6).

This mutual characteristic between a group of peoples provides a sense of belonging: the becoming of an identity. Although this much is true, Hall (1996) goes on to explain how an identity is not fashioned from what an individual is, but rather from what they are not. An example of an identity based on the absence of a quality may be those who are not white; whiteness being what they lack, and therefore they become the 'Other'. This identity in particular can be seen continuously throughout the history of moving image (alongside society in general), and is still greatly apparent to this day. Hall (1996) claims that an identity provides people with comfort and that without a sense of identification a subject would experience a deep sense of personal loss. However, one could argue that placing an individual in a group is often detrimental to their image, as an identity is never unattached from stigma. As a society, we are often reckless in our desire to classify, constantly attempting 'to find order in a natural world' (Sternberg 2014). Using the example of African Americans, Sternberg (2014) states that a subject may have to contain a slight glimmer of 'blackness' (be it from far back in the hereditary chain) for 'black' to become the marked term. That is to say that the myths attached to black people withstand for this person, although they may personally identify with whiteness.

I believe that the identity of the 'ethnic group' has a great scope of sub-headings and potential to provide an in depth analysis when applied to *Atlantis*.

> "The marginalisation of 'ethnicity' reflects the imaginary of the dominant group which envisions itself as the 'universal' or the 'essential' American nation, and thus somehow 'beyond' and 'above' ethnicity" (Shohat 1991, p.215)

This quote is re-established in the words of Hall (1996), stating that the construction of an identity is none other than an act of authority within social culture. Famously, the universal power remains with the white man, thus inferring the identities of the 'inferior' opposites; the 'Others' as a race, and women. However, as Barthes and Hall simultaneously claim, both identities and myths are not paralysed to remain as they are. The discourse surrounding a subject is constantly evolving, whether it be for the better or otherwise. In the case of *Atlantis*, the area and time in which it was set is clean, unaffected by globalisation; a concept which has changed the way in which we view cultures and identities. Therefore, this identity falls under the title of a 'foundational myth' (Hall 1996, p.614); the nation's origins being so ancient they become lost in a fabled time. Traditions and cultures within tribes are often seen as mysterious, a spectacle to the wealthy north, highlighting our ease to disguise what is real with a fictional facade. Although aware that the Atlantean ethnic group is (arguably) entirely fictional, Disney appears to have made very little effort to sway from the mythology surrounding the subject, and possibly even exaggerate it further. Barthes (1972) explains Aesop's methods to create a belief in the consumer that all is guiltless within his writings; the 'mythified' literature is made innocent by its being fiction. Disney replicated

this ancient technique within *Atlantis*, an idle censorship of a problematic portrayal. Nevertheless, on the discussion of mythology, Barthes (1972) reiterates the fact that myth lacks the ability to fabulise; that a non-fiction will always persist. Thus, Disney is removed from any pardon of wrongdoing that may have almost been accomplished; the myth of the ethnic group withstands within *Atlantis*, regardless of its fictionality.

In order to understand how the film may proliferate the myth of the 'ethnic group' identity, one must analyse the characters portrayed to fall under this group and how they contrast with the characters that do not. The protagonist in the film *Atlantis* is a linguist working as a boiler engineer named Milo Thatch. Milo somewhat alters from the stereotypical Disney hero as he is not particularly masculine either in his appearance or the way in which he behaves.

> "You are a scholar are you not? Judging from your diminished physique and your large forehead you are suited for nothing else!" (*Atlantis* 2002)

However, he possesses the characteristics most critical to any Disney protagonist: sympathetic, heroic, brave, but most importantly both male and Caucasian. Milo is also exceedingly intelligent, modest, and expectedly amiable; as is the norm for Disney's animated protagonists. On the other hand, the secondary (and 'civilised') characters with whom join Milo on the expedition are racially diverse. This is unusual and somewhat refreshing, subverting the myth that applies to the majority of Disney's animated features films: avoiding misrepresentations of race by literally whitewashing the cast (King et al. 2010). Nevertheless, the focal point and mythology in which I am to discuss is that of the 'Atlantean' people. The deuteragonist is an Atlantean named Kidagakash Nedakh. There is no evidence that this name is based on any real research, rather than a random assortment of consonants created in an attempt to provoke interest in the princess and enhance her fascinating unfamiliarities. However, merely seconds after her initial introduction, Kidagakash falls victim to Americanisation and is nicknamed 'Kida'. The princess is titled 'Kida' for the remainder of the film, all the way through to the credits. The 'whitening' of Kidagakash's name is due to Milo's inability to pronounce her name correctly, providing some comic relief. Although, considering his linguistic background and ability to speak their language at a relatively high level, this is unanticipated. This 'joke' exhibits the ignorance of the privileged 'first-world' citizens and their delight at making a spectacle of 'colourful' and 'unusual' names. Kida's father, king of Atlantis, also shares a similar and seemingly random name: Kashakim Nedakh. These names are virtually never spoken throughout the entirety of the film; evidentially proving the names to be pure accessories of ethnicity to provoke the myth of the tribal folk.

In order to further conclude whether or not Atlantis proliferates the myths of the tribal appearance, an important element to consider when analysing myth attached to a group of people is how they look. The Atlanteans are a fictional race, created in the classical Disney form: generically beautiful. The justification of Disney's design decisions is cowardly; their

ethnicity brushed off as fictional, how could they be offensive? As a nod to being racially diverse, the Atlantean people all have an identical shade of tanned skin; dark enough to identify as 'Others', however, light enough for the whitewashed generations to be comfortable with: an idealistically 'exotic' façade. The achieved character design may be considered to be striking; however, this result was achieved purely through 'a clumsy appropriation' of ethnic minorities across the globe (Barthes 1957, p.148). Another controversial element in the design of the Atlanteans, or be it specifically Kida, is that of their facial features. It is said that the Caucasian face is the most pervasively beautiful in the media, generally assumed to depict 'ideal human beauty' (Marquardt Aesthetic Imaging 2014). Therefore, as to conform to Disney princess standards of beauty, one could argue that Kida's face has been somewhat 'whitened' in terms of structure. Currently, Disney faces a bombardment of criticism for continuously designing female characters that look very much alike. This term has been coined to become the well-known phrase, 'Same Face Syndrome'. The symptoms of this trait could be purely down to a particular artist's style; however, they are more plausibly caused by the company's inability to accept an animated female who isn't 'pretty' (Anon 2014). This treatment appears to have been applied to princess Kida's face as she displays the generic large eyes, narrow chin and a slender nose. The only feature which could feasibly remove her from the 'white Disney princess' category would be her lips as they are full and vaguely reminiscent of a black woman's.

To understand if any subversion of the 'ethnic group' mythologies applies to the background characters, one must also study how they are shown. As to provoke the mythology of the ethnic group, every Atlantean appears greatly similar to one another. Although this may be due to the fact that the population has lived together for thousands of years encountering no outsiders, it also suggests the west's inability to differentiate between individuals of a foreign race. "Other-race faces seem to show less variation among individuals than own-race faces" (MacLin et al. 2001). Although this statement verifies that every race is guilty of such ignorance, it is universally recognised as a fault of Caucasians in particular. An article by Pomeroy (2014) claims that due to the wide variety of hair colour amongst Caucasians, hair becomes a 'racial marker' (MacLin et al. 2001). Similarly, black people vary widely in skin tone, thus using this feature as a method to distinguish (Pomeroy 2014). Believing this to be true, the Atlantean race display no means of distinction; each subject possesses the exact same shade of white hair and light brown skin. This clone-like effect could be an attempt to diminish any colour related class system that may have accidentally occurred throughout the film; however, the lack of variation comes off as insulting, as if to say ethnic people exist as one unit and never as an individual. The native Atlanteans also share another communal quality; they are adorned in luminous tattoos, a further outlandish feature to be marvelled at, removing them further from any possibility of a realistic depiction of an ethnic minority.

> "All that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it came from." (Barthes 1957, p.152)

In order to evaluate the proliferation or subversion of Barthes' mythologies and their relation to the ethnic woman, we must discuss how they are portrayed in *Atlantis*. As is the case with many depictions of an ethnic minority, the women become an 'eroticised object of the white gaze' (Maplesden 2009, p.59); wearing revealing clothing and displaying idealistic (and paramountly unrealistic) body proportions. Examples of this can be seen in almost all 'mainstream' animated representations of the 'ethnic group': Pocahontas (Pocahontas 1995), Chel (The Road to El Dorado 2000), Jasmine (Aladdin 1992) and to a lesser extent Esmerelda (The Hunchback of Notre-Dame 1996). It is a common trait within this stereotype to label the 'ethnic' woman as deviant, evoking both fear and sexual desire; classifying their sexualisation as 'natural' (Maplesden 2009, p.59). Here the myth is to blame, as it provides a 'false nature' in these objectified ethnic women; finding innocence within the most unsophisticated relationships (Barthes 1957). As is the case with *Atlantis* and all of these examples (excluding Jasmine) the white man will inevitably become the love interest, dominating over that of a man identified under the same 'political roof' (Hall 1996, p.612) as themselves. Why would she choose one of her own over the heroic, superior Caucasian? In the scene which introduces princess Kida, she aggressively punches a man in the face. It therefore could be argued that these characters are strong women who usually show an ability to stand up for themselves, be it verbally or physically: an agreeable decision from Disney. However, I believe this aspect to be an additional reminder of their identity; after all, the audience must not forget that these characters are uncouth 'savages'.

The violent behaviour of non-whites is a frequently used theme throughout western media and makes a subtle appearance in *Atlantis*. "Crime is violent and criminals are non-white" (Gilliam et al. 1996). It is mentioned in a discussion between princess Kida and her father (at his introduction) that "no outsiders may see the city and live" (Atlantis 2002): displaying the viciousness and 'un-civilisation' of their tribe. It is a fact that currently, African Americans are over three times more likely to be killed by police officers than white people (Fields 2015). As this is current statistics, it is evident that mythologies surrounding 'violent Others' remain due to the withstanding white supremacy of 'civilised' cultures. The documentary *Cannibal Tours* (0'Rourke 1988) displays a network of tribes throughout Papua New Guinea and the European tourists who bless them with their presence. This documentary conveys a reality for those who are classed as 'tribal' and for the natives of Atlantis. That is to say that they were savages and cannibals until the 'first-world' enlightened these non-whites with a cultured way of being: the 'correct' way to live.

The identity of the 'ethnic group' carries numerous mythologies as described by Barthes (1972), with intellect being one of them. Throughout the film, the aspect seeming to fascinate Milo most about the ways of Atlantean life is their intelligence. His admiration is rather belittling; how could tribal people possibly be so advanced? The mystical Atlanteans have a highly advanced technological system running throughout their 'lost empire' in which they are all connected via crystals worn around their necks. This almost science-fictionesque portrayal of this 'ethnic group' had the potential to subvert such myths of un-civilisation

within tribes, yet in reality what has been achieved is simply patronising. For any possible intelligence within the group (which plausibly could have been achieved with their life span of thousands of years) has been replaced with 'magic', brains replaced by crystals. If this portrayal was not derogatory enough, the Atlantean people seem to lack (or have somehow forgotten) the ability to both read their own language and operate their machinery. This type of knowledge could only belong to a truly brilliant individual: the protagonist, the hero, the white man. What is described here is the widespread, specious belief that tribal (specifically African) people have a lower IQ than that of whites, thought of to be an evolutionary and genetic outcome of their race. It is a wonder that this myth is still said to be true, as 'race is a socially constructed concept, not a biological one' (Sternberg 2014). Therefore, the audience may comprehend the Atlantean group to be more credible as a non-white minority; for 'others' of a higher social status (and improved intellect) obtain degrees of 'whiteness', relieving them from their true racial identity with 'white' becoming their marked term (Sternberg 2014). Disney can consequently object from any claims of whitewashing throughout their portrayal of an 'ethnically diverse' tribe, the marked term loosely adhering to something other than white. This proliferates the mythologies demonstrating the simplistic minds of ethnic people, and their continuous need to be saved by the 'superior race'.

We must now further discuss the topic of racial hierarchy and if *Atlantis* (2002) proves to subvert such mythologies. Towards the middle of the film (*Atlantis*) the antagonist is revealed to be Lyle Rourke, the commander of the expedition, relentless in his attempts to reap the treasures to be found within the lost empire. As the villain and the hero are alike in race and gender (white men), one may argue that there is nothing here to be offensive or, boldly spoken, racist. However, I believe that this displays a concept entirely the opposite. That being the only potentially effective defence is that of another white man: to 'fight fire with fire'. This suggests that there is no greater an opponent; that the ethnic group stand no chance if they are to merely fight for themselves. This automatically groups *Atlantis* with the vast array of 'white saviour' films (Hughey 2014), an idea often used in film and literature, an example being the novel 'To Kill a Mockingbird' (Lee 1960). This concept has become colloquially known as the 'Mighty Whitey' (Anon no date). The act of Atticus Finch defending the innocent African American (Tom Robinson) is initially taken to be a display of empathy, before one may come to realise that maybe it is not so. The similarities between Milo and Atticus are more apparent than one may initially think, inasmuch as they are portrayed and received by the audience. Milo takes it upon himself to 'protect' the Atlantean kingdom and their people as they are 'innocent and helpless victims of rabid racism' (Crespino 2000, p.15): heavily proliferating the myth behind the 'ethnic group'. The viewer may accept Milo as a sort of 'racial hero', which is an indication towards the political stance on racial issues throughout the late 20th century (Crespino 2000). Milo has a clear consciousness of what is 'right', however, as is also displayed by Atticus, merely sympathises

with the victims; the option remains for them to return to life as it was: unchanged, unharmed and un-empathetic.

> "Varied intercultural and interracial relations are often guided by a logic that racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites)" (Hughey 2014, p.2)

Hughey's statement highlights the problematic nature of *Atlantis*; that no ethnic individual could defend his or her self, and if there were nothing to defend it would be because a 'white saviour' had already granted their freedom. This point is also accentuated by the apparent passiveness of the 'general public' of Atlantis, who never express any feeling of injustice being demonstrated by the white supremacy. "This disinterest, mingled with fear, ultimately stands in the way of cross-racial empathy" (Pryal 2014).

To make a final evaluation of whether Disney attempts to subvert the myths adjoining the ethnic minority, I must look deeper into the history behind it. "On the other hand, a decidedly anthropological gaze has refocused on indigenous peoples" (King et al. 2010). This statement describes a sub-genre within the mythology of the 'ethnic group': the so-called 'noble savage'. This title was famously described in 'The Noble Savage' (Dickens 1853). Although Dickens' essay is much older in the timeline of literature, the idea appears to persist even today. The opinions in his essay are crude and blunt, making no attempt to appear impartial to the subject. It is possible that Dickens' views reflect the perspective of his era, however, there is evidence that this concept pre-dates his writings, originating in 1609 through the works of Lescarbot: a French explorer (Ellingson 2001). Although this racial branding is usually a stereotype attached to Native Americans, it continues to expand, further blemishing the faces of all 'others'. In *Atlantis*, the princess Kida occupies this role, playing up to this literary stock character and anthropological theory. That is to say that Kida (as a noble savage) contains an idealised characteristic of goodness which is instinctual to her, regardless of the fact that she is 'wild'. This racial slur is insulting towards indigenous folk, labelling them as an almost separate species; their behaviour monitored in such a way that tarnishes them as wildlife. "The idea that native peoples lived in harmony with the environment' (Hames 2007, p.179) is a focal element in the detection of what one could identify as a 'noble savage'. Their heightened spirituality gives them a superior relationship to the natural world (King et al. 2010), thus placing them in a theoretical category separate from both animals and humans: above the former and below the latter. This theme is depicted tirelessly throughout mainstream film: Avatar (2009), Pocahontas (1995) and Brother Bear (2003). The 'crystal technology' powering the Atlantean people's excessively long lives and resilience of their land causes this myth to thrive in my chosen film of study; "clearing a space for reflection on an alternate (and largely imagined) environmentalism" (King et al. 2010).

In conclusion, the mythologies attached to the identity of the 'ethnic group' depicted in *Atlantis: The lost Empire* are heavily proliferated, with almost no subversion. The

proliferation of the myth is caused by the exoticism and romanticism of the way the Atlanteans look, their patronisingly heightened intelligence, violent behaviour, metaphysical relationship with nature and the fact that they are shown to require help and salvation from the superior white man. Using princess Kida as the main example in this text, the mythologies of the 'ethnic group' are wildly exaggerated, idealised and exotic for the sake of an aesthetic to please the western audience. Although it could be argued that this ethnic group in particular is fictional and could be removed from any mythologies due to this, Disney has made it apparent that the design is intended to be plausible to the viewer; therefore causing said myths to flourish. It would be an interesting task to delve deeper into *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* to further explore whether it may subvert the myths surrounding the 'ethnic group'. However, to receive the mainstream animation at face-value would be to witness a clear proliferation of the mythologies and how it does so.

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